

FERDINAND MUELLER, GOVERNMENT BOTANIST: THE ROLE OF WILLIAM HOOKER IN HIS APPOINTMENT

by

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ABSTRACT

Cohn, Helen M. Ferdinand Mueller, Government Botanist: the role of William Hooker in his appointment. *Muelleria* 7(1): 99-102 (1989) — Contemporary commentary makes no mention of William Hooker being involved in Mueller's appointment as Government Botanist in Victoria. The only obituary that makes this claim is unreliable. Later writers offer no support for their contention that Hooker recommended Mueller for the post. Circumstances of Mueller's training, early emigration to Australia and botanical researches in Australia before settling in Victoria suggest that the possibilities for him to have established any connection with Hooker were too limited for Hooker to be in a position to recommend him. The Colonial Office disclaimed official knowledge of Mueller's appointment, an unlikely occurrence had Hooker been involved. Statements made by Mueller and Hooker themselves confirm that Hooker had no role in Mueller's appointment.

INTRODUCTION

It is generally believed that Ferdinand Mueller's appointment by Charles La Trobe to the position of Government Botanist to the Colony of Victoria in 1853 was at the recommendation of Sir William Hooker, then Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. This would not have been unusual or unexpected given Hooker's position of influence with regard to the placement of suitably qualified people in colonial botanical posts. However, an examination of contemporary and later writings reveals little ground to support this contention. Similarly, the circumstances of Mueller's early career suggest that it was most unlikely that Hooker made any such recommendation.

BIOGRAPHICAL SOURCES

There are very few contemporary biographical notes about Mueller which shed any light on this question. Mueller was extremely reticent about himself, his letters and publications being confined almost exclusively to his work. It was left to other people to make public the details of his career. Among the earliest general biographical notes is that written by Joseph Knapp (1877). In it he states: 'In demselben Jahre [1852] folgte er dem Rufe des Gouverneurs C. Latrobe als Regierungs-Botaniker der Colonie Victoria in den Staatsdienst . . .'. No mention is made here of any intercession on the part of William Hooker.

On Mueller's death in 1896 a large number of obituaries and memorial notices was published. These also are remarkably silent on the circumstances of Mueller's appointment. Baldwin Spencer, Professor of Biology at the University of Melbourne and like Mueller one of the leading figures in the still small world of Victorian science, wrote from personal acquaintance with Mueller (Spencer 1896). Spencer makes no mention of William Hooker but gives La Trobe all the credit: 'Evidently his reputation as a botanist had preceded him, for in the same year Governor Latrobe appointed him Government Botanist . . .'. Other memorialists, like Spencer, credit Mueller's appointment solely to La Trobe (Battye 1897; Warburg 1897), or make no mention of the underlying reasons (McOwan 1896; Anon. 1896).

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The only obituary that attributes to William Hooker any role in Mueller's appointment is that written by William's son Joseph, his successor as Director at Kew (Hooker 1897). In it he says:

Among his [Mueller's] English correspondents was Sir W. Hooker, who interested himself in his favour with Mr Goulburn, then on the point of leaving England as Lieutenant-Governor of Victoria, and who was desirous of having the vegetable resources of that colony turned to the best account. This resulted in the creation of a Department of Botany in the Public Service of Victoria, and the appointment of Mueller to its directorship.

No 'Mr Goulburn' occupied any senior position in the Victorian Civil Service at that time. It seems probable that Joseph Hooker was referring to Frederick Goulburn who came to the colonies as Colonial Secretary (not Lieutenant-Governor) to New South Wales (not Victoria) and died in 1837. There are other errors of fact in the obituary: Mueller is said to have arrived in Victoria from South Australia in 1848 (the actual date was 1852) expressly to visit the Victorian alps, and to have been one of the three founders of the Royal Society of Victoria. The Society came into being from the amalgamation of two earlier societies having between them a total of 21 founding members. In 1897 when he wrote this tribute to Mueller, Joseph Hooker was 80 years old, trusting to his memory to recall events of 45 years previously. Joseph Hooker cannot be considered a reliable witness to his father's role in Mueller's appointment.

Later biographers unequivocally state that William Hooker was involved in Mueller's appointment. Mueller was variously said to have been 'well accredited by the eminent botanist, Sir William Hooker' (Daley 1924: 26) and 'recommended' by him (Hardy 1945), and La Trobe to have been 'persuaded' by Hooker to appoint Mueller (Roach 1921). The two major biographies of Mueller claim that Hooker had 'spoken highly of the merits of Dr Ferdinand Mueller' (M. Willis 1949: 19), and that approval of the appointment lay with Hooker (Kynaston 1981: 80). Other writers have simply followed suit, for example J. Willis (1971) and Powell (1982). However not one of these writers offers any supporting evidence.

MUELLER IN EUROPE

It is highly unlikely that William Hooker knew very much about Mueller at the time of his appointment. Mueller left Germany at the age of 22, having just qualified and having had little if any time to establish a reputation for himself outside his own country. His outward journey to South Australia on the 'Herrmann von Beckerath' seems to have offered him no opportunity to meet either of the Hookers or any of the other leading botanical personalities in England, so that he was virtually unknown to the British botanical establishment. For the first five years of his time in Australia before settling in Victoria, the specimens and papers he sent back to Europe were to his German colleagues rather to anyone in England. This is reflected in the pattern of his early publications.

By the end of 1853 Mueller's European publications comprised eight papers in German scientific journals and only two in England (Churchill, Muir & Sinkora 1978 & 1984). Taking into account the length of time for mail to reach Europe and the vagaries of the editorial and publication process, publications in Europe or England in 1853 represent work done some time before that. In the absence of any scientific publishing outlet in the Australian colonies, Mueller had naturally turned to the contacts he had at home to assist with the publication of his scientific researches.

The two papers published in England were actually translations of papers published in Germany in the same year (Mueller 1853c & 1853d). They appeared in William Hooker's own *Journal of Botany and Kew Garden Miscellany* (Mueller 1853a & 1853b). However, they were not sent to Hooker. Rather they were sent to Richard Kippist, then Librarian to the Linnean Society of London, who translated them from German and read them to meetings of the Society on the 7th and 21st December 1852 respectively. Hooker had an unhappy history of publishing a succession of journals which struggled and finally collapsed under the weight of a small buying public,

dwindling copy and heavy production costs (Brock 1980). It is not hard to see why he would have seized the opportunity to print these two short papers in the fourth and last of his journals. What is clear from this is that Mueller at that point had no thought of relying on Hooker as he did on his German contacts.

Even had William Hooker been well acquainted with Mueller it is unlikely he would have recommended him ahead of a British botanist. Throughout his career at Kew Hooker was instrumental in placing British botanists in key botanical posts, all of which were official, all over the world. In this he took his 'right' of patronage very seriously. There is the celebrated case of Charles Moore, who was appointed to the Botanic Gardens in Sydney ahead of Hooker's own nominee and to Hooker's considerable disgust (Gilbert 1986). His influence in colonial botanical matters was well known. G. W. Francis at the Adelaide Botanic Gardens appealed to Hooker for support should rival claims be made for his job as Director there (Best 1986).

COLONIAL APPOINTMENT

Finally, had William Hooker recommended or approved Mueller's appointment the necessary correspondence would have passed through the Colonial Office in London. Minuted on a letter from Governor Hotham to the Colonial Office dated 31st January 1855 is the following revealing comment:

I do not recall that Dr Mueller's name ever came officially before this Department before. He is here styled Government Botanist, and he certainly was appointed in the Colony. I recollect, however, Mr La Trobe mentioning Dr Mueller very favorably in a private letter. He would be able to furnish any information regarding Dr Mueller. (CO 309 v.31 204)

The most positive indication that William Hooker played no part in Mueller's appointment comes from Mueller himself. He introduced himself to Hooker in a letter dated 3rd February 1853, a mere seven days after being appointed Government Botanist. He had already embarked on the first of his exploring journeys through Victoria.

As a highly esteemed promoter of botanical science throughout the world, you will, I trust, Sir William, not without some interest receive the intelligence, that his Excell. our scientific Governor Latrobe has been pleased to entrust to me the newly created office of a government botanist for this province, an appointment that I joyfully accept, as it now enables me at length to devote my time henceforth exclusively to the study of the indigenous plants . . . Of my botanical labours in South Australia, I suppose little came to your notice . . . (Kew Correspondence v.74, 135)

Hooker replied that he was 'most agreeably surprised' to have received the 'welcome intelligence' of his engagement by the government. 'This is exactly as it should be and I shall write to the Governor by this day's post to thank him for his service thus rendered to our favourite science' (Argus 31.10.1853 p. 5).

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The letter from Mueller to William Hooker is quoted with permission from the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

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